Pursuit of a Monthly Story

Doctor Who in an Exciting Adventure on the Nightjar

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Artwork from Doctor Who: In The Night, by the incredible Ryan Aplin

If I ever talk at length about Doctor Who Big Finish audios (honestly, God help you if I get you cornered), I will usually get around to mentioning that the early days of the Doctor Who Main Range was my era of Who. I became a fan during the 'Wilderness Years', a period when the show was off the television and the further exploits of our favourite Time Lord were found in books, comics… and yes, an amazing range of audio dramas that began in 1999. I feel very lucky that these stories were in my life at just the right time - and I'm always a little saddened that other fandoms don't get to have these kind of audio adventures ('What do you mean, Star Trek doesn't do radio plays?!').

These initial Big Finish stories, in my mind, were the best of both worlds. They retained much of the sensibilities of the TV era - the shape, the pacing, even the rhythm of the dialogue - but they also had deeper emotional 'modern' sensibilities and a vaster canvas to work upon. That's a really arty-farty way of putting it, cos basically,

this is typically what extended universe stuff lets you do anyway - you literally get to *extend* stuff, you go deeper, go harder, go geekier. You fly a little further than the mothership allows.

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Releases 01-50 are the Holy Writ to me. I wore out my CDs with replays. They were varied, experimental, cosy, expansive. Still to this day I get snippets of dialogue lodged in my head ('The skis poles, they're rising up!', 'And that's something else I've taught-us', 'If I press this switch - I will DIE!') or I'll hum blasts of incidental music (the pipes of *The Marian Conspiracy*, the cyber-fanfare of *The Sword of Orion,* oof, the noise of the Garazone system!!). Truth be told, I haven't gone back and listened to many of them since I started writing for Doctor Who on audio. I ought to. I think part of me is nervous to do so? I'd want to swim in those vats of nostalgia without comparing myself to them. And I *would* compare myself to them. I wanted to tell Doctor Who stories long before I wanted to be a writer.

I tried to write for the Main Range a couple of times. My first submission was when I was around the age of 14, yikes. We were studying Samuel Taylor Coleridge in English and I proposed a story where the Sixth Doctor and Peri took drugs on a train and ended up in Xanadu. Ummm…. I think the polite but bemused rejection letter said something like 'this clearly demonstrates your love of literature' and I was very smug about that. (I believe this particular submission round resulted in *Live 34* so look, I bow to their better judgement.) I sent a few more ideas in, first to the address on the letterhead, then to an email address when I got myself online… I really hope there are no records of any of these because obviously they were Very Very Embarrassing. I will say though that I wrote an entire Benny Summerfield script for my Year 9 Media project and it had moving stone statues BEFORE *Blink* so… basically I'm a genius. *(N.B. script no longer exists to verify this claim.)*

When I started writing for Big Finish a) it was a dream come true b) I hoped it would only be a matter of time before I wrote for that vaunted range now known as The

Monthly Adventures, now spiraling into three digits, now bulging with capers and classics. My time would come.

And then it ended.

noooooooo

I think had the range gone on for even just a year longer, I would've felt like I was in a position to pitch for it. But I don't begrudge missing out on it. Honest. I'm proud of the route my writing took through the audios - especially some of the great work I've been part of in the Torchwood range - and it was very cool to be at the arrival of this new 'box-set phase' of storytelling. There's a community and a coordination when you're a gang of people working on a box, and even someone as anti-social as me enjoys that aspect. Still, there is something to be said about a range that lets you focus on a particular story each month. Plus the four-part format we know and love from the telly (a strange structure anyway) is becoming slightly rarer in this new landscape.

Okay, so why have I been babbling on about the Main Range/Monthly Adventures?

Well, *Pursuit of the Nightjar* - my new Doctor Who audio out this week - is a love letter to the range.

Don't get me wrong, it was never intended for The Monthly Adventures (it was actually originally pitched as a 3rd Doctor and Jo story), nor is it in anyway really intended as a tribute. But the ending of the range was announced just around about the time I was putting pen to paper for this particular script… and suddenly, all sorts of homages were leaking into the tale.

For example… the episodes needed to begin with recordings, like the framing device of *Loups-Garoux*. There was the importance of a certain piano refrain, like *Winter For The Adept*. Peer hard, and you'll find all sorts of echoes of and references to those early Big Finishes, both in form and content. I wasn't desperately trying to crowbar these Easter eggs in - but for a story all about stories, about the ways they can inspire you, it felt really nice when they started to surface in the text.

Concept art for Star Wars by Ralph McQuarrie

I hope you enjoy *Nightjar*, if you get a chance to listen. I wanted the titular spaceship to feel epic and empty, like it was designed by Moebius or Ralph McQuarrie. I wanted this tiny cast to feel even tinier within it, so vulnerable, always inches from death. From what I've heard so far, everything from the beautiful performances to the stunning synths and sound design - they absolutely managed to capture this vibe. It's a slow story, intentionally so, with long scenes and strange sounds so you can really get immersed in its environment. I write plenty of snappy hour-long adventures, sometimes I want an atmospheric sci-fi stroll! So be like younger Tim, curl up with your CDs and get lost in its soundscape. Plus, if pick it up, you'll also get a story from Sarah Grochala, a writer I really admire. What's not to like?

This isn't the last time I'll be inspired by the Main Range - I have another two-hour story out later this year, *The Great Cyber-War*, that definitely owes a lot to one of my faves, *The Sword of Orion*. But more on that later, maybe. It's funny that there are now Big Finishes by writers who grew up with them. I hope that feels less like an Ouroboros eating its own tail and more… pleasingly cyclical. I've announced I'm taking a break, but we're probably only about halfway through my stories for the Whoniverse. So fear not, there are plenty more surprises to come!

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Elain Freeman Sep 8, 2023

Liked by Tim Foley

I just commented yesterday on the Divergent Universe forum that this felt like a Monthly Range story. I loved it!

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